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A Farewell to Goodbyes: Reconciling the Past in Cheever's "Goodbye, My Brother"

: p. 107-120

1 As critic Charles C. Nash notes, one of the recurring themes in John Cheever's fiction is provided by the metaphorical struggle between two brothers. Scott Donaldson, Cheever's biographer, traces the source of this quarrel back to Cheever's real life conflict with his brother, Fred: "Later, as he drove me back to the ferry, he spoke with feeling of his recently deceased brother. 'Some people have parents or children,' he said. 'I had a brother.' There seemed no appropriate response. 'For a long time I couldn't take him,' he added, and then, quietly, 'I still can't'" (ix). A key text that unites these elements is Cheever's short story "Goodbye, My Brother" (1951), which details the clash between Lawrence, the brother of the title, and his family. By dissecting Cheever's carefully constructed framework, it becomes clear that the divisions in the Pommeroy family are representative of spiritual and historical forces that transcend the particularity of the situation. The effect of the narrative voice is to initiate a move beyond the surface story, thus showing how these forces penetrate every level of discourse, from the level of everyday life (in the family's clashes with Lawrence) to its deeper, more metaphysical levels (in the story's religious, historical, and mythical references). Cheever thus uses the surface narrative to explore a clash of values through three intertwining discursive prisms: history, religion, and the law.

2 But as many critics have pointed out, Cheever's story is not structured around the brother of the title – as a character, Lawrence barely speaks more than a few lines in the entire narrative – but instead explores the narrator's own psychology. Wendell Mayo, for example, writes: "We no longer have a narrator defined in relative terms – 'I' and not 'Lawrence' – but in terms of difference: 'I' and 'not-I'" (96). Mayo's interpretation is affirmed by Cheever's own reflection in a 1953 letter to Malcolm Cowley, in which he reveals that Lawrence was, in fact, absent from the story's earliest drafts.

> The brother story, in its bare outline, was the story of one man. There was no brother; there was no Lawrence. (In the finished story he speaks only a few lines and the bulk of his opinions are given to him by the narrator.) I tried to bury this outline then under several others so that the story would unfold like an uncooked onion. (*Letters* 160)

3 The function of the narrator is to evaluate his family's ideas, and the story is the scale on which he weighs the different worldviews he encounters in that milieu. His effectiveness is guaranteed by the double consciousness with which Cheever imbues him. Indeed, the narrator shifts continually back and forth between lyrical celebrations of life and gloomy ruminations about Lawrence's character. David Raney writes: "The 'I' of the story seems at first a patient, long-suffering and trustworthy narrator, but as the tale progresses we realize that a great deal of Lawrence's gloominess is not demonstrated but ascribed to him, proceeding less from his act than his thoughts, to which we have no access but the narrator's speculation. Lawrence does, to be sure, say irritating and unnecessarily frank things, but we note that the narrator is not himself free of the disappointment and invidiousness that seem to emanate from his brother" (71). For the narrator, the external clash between Lawrence and his family, and the irreconcilable nature of their values, is repeated at the internal level: in the end, the narrator is forced to reconcile these conflicting philosophical positions in his own life.

4 Cheever emphasizes this process of reevaluation through a subtle series of textual repetitions. In a superb piece of analysis, Patrick Meanor traces many of the historical repetitions that occur in the story.

> [T]he summer house, or Eden, of the Pommeroy family is called Laud's Head, a name which, if one knows some English religious history, undoubtedly refers to one of the most famous Anglican Archbishops, William Laud, who was beheaded by the Puritans in 1645 for attempting to bring back into the Episcopal Church music, ritual, the Communion table, and the sacramental system the Puritans had banned. [...] Chaddy Pommeroy [...] and Chucky Ewing [...] both have names that are cognates of [...] Charles I, who also lost his head to the Puritans under the chief Roundhead, Oliver Cromwell. (43-44)

5 Among other key insights, Meanor points out that the house is located in Philadelphia, the "City of Brotherly Love," that the French roots of the name Pommeroy signifies "king of the apples," a further reference to the story's Edenic context, as well as highlighting Cheever's connection back to such American romantics as Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman (44-46). Beneath the story's linear structure, therefore, Cheever creates an underlying thematic circularity. In an expansive analysis of Cheever's fictional structures, Robert Morace writes: "Essentially, Cheever plays the same scene or situation over and over with slight but cumulatively significant changes, gradually transforming the real into the fantastic, time into dream. [...] [His fiction] depends considerably less on linear plot, narrative focus, and character development than it does on various forms of narrative parallelism: echoing, juxtaposition, counterpoint, incremental repetition, thematic variations, and the coming together of disparate characters, situations, and narrative lines" (505-7). Understanding this structure is crucial to the interpretation of the story, and it is no accident that the narrative's "double structure" echoes the "double consciousness" of the narrator.

6 The tension between these temporal modes is a direct translation of the story's philosophical conflicts. Indeed, Raney argues that a key feature of the brother motif is the way it evokes Cheever's "deep distrust of nostalgia" (63). The narrator makes it clear that Lawrence's nostalgia arises from a nihilistic fascination with formalizing the historical process, not a love of the past. Lawrence is obsessed with uncovering a truth that is defined by its origin: it is at the origin, he believes, that the essence of any historical object is located. The problem, for Lawrence, is that his searches for the origin reveal it to have always already been displaced by the movement of time and history. This recurrent failure cuts to the heart of Lawrence's discontentment with his own being: the absence of his father (who drowned during his childhood) equates to the loss of his physical origin. Lawrence feels that, without his father, the quest to discover his true identity is doomed to failure. To the narrator, Lawrence's outlook is inherently false, a view that he unfolds through Lawrence's highly problematic engagement with his past.

7 Within the sphere of Lawrence's values, the greatest crime seems to lie in the world's disrespect for stability. Lawrence values the things that last, which point to a fixed origin that can be definitely traced and located. He is disgusted by the modern, shifting world that he sees around him, and thus he spends much of the story – and indeed, much of his life – in a condemnatory pose. The narrator relays Lawrence's mindset to the reader, for example, via Lawrence's criticism of the family beach house. Lawrence is lamenting the fact that the house, built just over twenty years ago, has been constructed so that it appears to be much older.

> "This house is about twenty-two years old," he said. "These shingles are about two hundred years old. Dad must have bought shingles from all the farms around here when he built the place, to make it look venerable. […] Imagine spending thousands of dollars to make a sound house look like a wreck," Lawrence said. "Imagine the frame of mind this implies. Imagine wanting to live so much in the past that you'll pay men carpenters' wages to disfigure your front door." Then I remembered Lawrence's sensitivity to time and his sentiments and opinions about our feelings for the past. I had heard him say, years ago, that we and our friends and our part of the nation, finding

> ourselves unable to cope with the problems of the present, had, like a wretched adult, turned back to what we supposed was a happier and simpler time, and that our taste for reconstruction and candlelight was a measure of this irremediable failure. (Cheever, "Goodbye" 9)

8 That Lawrence, in this diatribe, points back to his father is significant, for the father's drowning is a key point of rupture. Lawrence feels that his father has betrayed him, that it is his father who, by disappearing into the sea, has allowed the world to become unfastened from its foundations. It is from this perspective that he stands in judgment of the world, a world that, as he sees it, has betrayed him by its lack of respect for stability and tradition. He condemns his sister Diana's "promiscuity," for example, as a symptom of the decadence that has enveloped his destabilized family. Her behavior is unsatisfactory to him because it does not lead to the formalized, regulated history that his own marriage signifies.

9 The contradictions in Lawrence's viewpoint are articulated at the costume party held towards the end of the story. The theme of the party is nostalgia, and the participants are invited to "come as you wish you were" (14). The narrator's wife, Helen, decides to wear her wedding dress and, in a touching coincidence, so do several other women at the dance. There is nothing nihilistic or mournful about this decision: Cheever paints Helen's choice as an affirmation, a confirmation that she is joyful about the contingencies that have led to her current position in life. Lawrence, by contrast, cannot help but see his family's behavior through the frame of his pessimism. "And I knew that Lawrence was looking bleakly at the party as he had looked at the weather-beaten shingles on our house, as if he saw here an abuse and a distortion of time; as if in wanting to be brides and football players we exposed the fact that, the lights of youth having been put out in us, we had been unable to find other lights to go by and, destitute of faith and principle, had become foolish and sad" (16). The contradiction lies in Lawrence's simultaneous attraction and repulsion for the past. On the one hand, he wants to cement the past and its traditions, to ground history in a point of origin that gives stability to the world and, ultimately, to himself. History thus draws Lawrence towards it, as he seeks to define a stable identity in the past. But for Lawrence the past is only whole and comfortable when seen from a distance. As soon as he tries to investigate more deeply (as he is perversely and repeatedly tempted to do) he finds that disparity lies at the core of every apparent origin. Nothing is as it seems when he scratches the surface, and thus the meaning he has assigned to something (and in turn, his identity in relation to that thing) is shattered. It is for this reason that Lawrence is vehement in his critique of the house, of the nostalgic costume dance, of his family, and indeed, unconsciously, of himself. Lawrence's ambivalence towards the past creates a double movement, a seesaw motion of attraction and repulsion. Lawrence's attitude sets the unconscious pattern for his life, a fact to which the narrator attempts to draw his attention.

> "I don't like it here," he said blandly […] "The only reason I came back was to say goodbye."
> I let him get ahead again and I walked behind him, looking at his shoulders and thinking of all the goodbyes he had made. When Father drowned, he went to church and said goodbye to Father. It was only three years later that he concluded that Mother was frivolous and said goodbye to her. […] Now he had said goodbye to Cleveland and come East again, stopping at Laud's Head long enough to say goodbye to the sea.
> It was elegiac and it was bigoted and narrow, it mistook circumspection for character, and I wanted to help him. "Come out of it," I said. "Come out of it, Tifty." (18-19)

10 But Lawrence is in denial of this fateful pattern, and the narrator's words do nothing to alleviate his entrenched bad faith. When the narrator tells him that his pessimism is "nothing but an unwillingness to grasp realities," Lawrence replies that he can see his family's realities perfectly well: their sisters Diana and Odette are "promiscuous," their mother is an "alcoholic," their brother Chaddy is "dishonest," and so on (19). Lawrence's return to Laud's Head, this token farewell visit to his family, therefore becomes the latest in a lifelong series of personal failures. Lawrence transforms his memory of these goodbyes by coating them with a

pessimistic sheen that is designed to transfer all blame away from himself. The fault lies with his father, with his family, with his former employers, with the sea, but never with his own take on life. Lawrence extends his lawyer mentality to the existential aspects of his life: the law is on his side, he cannot be wrong, he can justify his outlook in these quasi-legal terms even though the judge (the Pommeroy father, God, Cotton Mather, whatever form he takes) has long since disappeared. Thus he is condemned to wander endlessly, drawn forward by a hopeless, Kafkaesque desire for absolution. The sad irony of Lawrence's life is that his search for stability produces the opposite of its intended effect. Lawrence has a recurring need to say goodbye, to wipe the slate clean, but his life has thereby become an endless series of goodbyes, of failures dressed up as moral affronts. The past, for Lawrence, is something that, despite its initial attraction, must ultimately be denied in the interests of petty self-preservation.

11 The narrator hints throughout that Lawrence's attitude is linked to the death of their father. The children were left fatherless, without the traditional figurehead of familial law, but are united nonetheless by their common last name, the name of the father. The sea has symbolically scattered the paternal law, which is no longer united in a single entity but instead has been disseminated into a set of infinite, shifting possibilities. Morace writes: "No longer a rite of passage, travel is what Cheever's Sisyphean characters must do, condemned to searching desperately but ineffectually for the psychological and spiritual stability that the father represents, yearning (and invariably failing) to realize their great expectations" (517). Lawrence's reaction, fittingly, is to become a lawyer: in the absence of the dead father, he takes upon himself the impossible task of reformulating the law, of reconstructing it in such a way that its shattered pieces somehow can be put back together. But this task is impossible, and the drive of the story emerges from this clash between Lawrence's grim determination to discover a fixed, graspable world, and the rest of the family, who have come to accept the fluidity and transience of life. Cheever characterizes Lawrence's feelings through the metaphor of the sea wall. "'This house will be in the sea […] The sea wall is badly cracked,' Lawrence said. "I looked at it this afternoon. You had it repaired four years ago, and it cost eight thousand dollars. You can't do that every four years'" (Cheever, "Goodbye" 7). Lawrence fears that the sea, destroyer of his father and the law, will also destroy the family structure itself, as symbolized by the house. Cheever's allusion is to the Bible, to Matthew 7:26-7, in which Jesus says: "Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened to a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it" (AKJV). For Lawrence, the family has built its foundations on sinking sand, a view that Cheever thematically transfers from the house to the values that underpin the lives of his mother and siblings.

12 The clash between Lawrence and his family is therefore set up as a clash between the narrator's pagan, mythological references and the Christian outlook embodied by Lawrence. Indeed, claims the narrator, the Pommeroy family has deep connections back to America's Puritan past.

> With his mouth set, my brother looked to me then like a Puritan critic. Sometimes, when I try to understand his frame of mind, I think of the beginnings of our family in this country […] The branch of the Pommeroys to which we belong was founded by a minister who was eulogized by Cotton Mather for his untiring abjuration of the Devil. The Pommeroys were ministers until the middle of the nineteenth century, and the harshness of their thought – man is full of misery, and all earthly beauty is lustful and corrupt – has been preserved in books and sermons. The temper of our family changed somewhat and became more lighthearted, but […] it seemed to me to have been a trial of the spirit in which Lawrence had succumbed. (Cheever, "Goodbye" 6)

13 The narrator's historical reminiscences reaffirm the story's basic thematic structure: the clash between the father, the mythological founder of the law, and the legacy he leaves to his children.

Discursive level	*Legal guarantor*	*Legal structure*
Narrative	Pommeroy father	Pommeroy family
Religious	God the Father	Christianity
Mythological	Uranus	Greek gods
Historical	Cotton Mather	America

Figure 1: Legal Symbolism in "Goodbye, My Brother"

14 From this familial narrative, Cheever interweaves an intricate series of allusions into the story that change and distort its meaning. The absence of the Pommeroy father constitutes more than just a fictional device: Cheever places him at the fringes of the story in order to create a deliberate echo of the other legal discourses evoked by the narrator. Through this repeated association, the Pommeroy father becomes the symbol of the law. His legal correlates are mapped in Figure 1: God the Father, the Logos from the Gospel of John and the author of the Ten Commandments; Uranus, the grandfather of the Greek gods and the father of the Titans; and Cotton Mather, the patriarch and lawgiver of colonial, Puritan America.

15 The narrator shows how each character's religious beliefs, however vague, inform their understanding of life and history. The narrator, for example, sees Lawrence's attitude towards the past as the natural outgrowth of the family's Puritan legacy. This attitude is exemplified one evening when the family gathers to play backgammon.

> I think that Lawrence used to play – I can't remember – but he doesn't play any more. He doesn't gamble. This is not because he is poor or because he has any principles about gambling but because he thinks the game is foolish and a waste of time. He was ready enough, however, to waste his time watching the rest of us play. (12)

16 Lawrence follows the traditional Puritan prejudice against games of chance, yet he does so without any idea as to *why* he follows this tradition: the rationale provided by the past is fixed and opaque to him, and all that remains is an inexplicable rule that must be followed. The absurdity of his subscription to this tradition is underscored by the observation that Lawrence contradicts his own reason for not playing (the game is a waste of time) by sitting and observing it. The game thus takes on a spiritual symbolism that signifies, for Lawrence, the decadent values of his family.

> He watched raptly, as if the opaque checkers and the marked board served for an exchange of critical power. How dramatic the board, in its ring of light, and the quiet players and the crash of the sea outside must have seemed to him! Here was spiritual cannibalism made visible; here,

> under his nose, were the symbols of the rapacious use human beings make of one another. […] I suppose Lawrence thought that the old woman and her son were playing for each other's soul. (13)

17 For the narrator, Lawrence's attitude exemplifies the Puritan outlook on life: sitting on the margins, refusing to play or participate directly, yet reserving for itself a place from which it can sit in judgment. It is this self-righteous attitude, this log in Lawrence's own eye, which earns him the contempt of the narrator and his family.

18 Cheever shows how this Puritan legacy has unconsciously spread from Lawrence into the attitudes of his wife and children. Just as the backgammon game becomes a symbol, for Lawrence, of his siblings' decadence, so too Lawrence's family becomes an extended signifier of his bad faith. His wife's name, for example, is Ruth, a reference to her ascetic, long-suffering namesake in the Old Testament.

> [O]n leaving the house, [I] passed Ruth in the laundry. She was washing clothes. I don't know why she should seem to have so much more work to do than anyone else, but she is always washing or ironing or mending clothes. She may have been taught, when she was young, to spend her time like this, or she may be at the mercy of an expiatory passion. She seems to scrub and iron with a penitential fervor, although I can't imagine what it is that she thinks she's done wrong. (17)

19 Cheever thus portrays Ruth as a kindred spirit to Lawrence's eternal dissatisfaction: whereas he is constantly in the process of avoiding his sin, of saying goodbye over and over to his failures, she is fated to return to hers via a symbolic and obsessive penance. The narrator's use of overtly religious language in his description, referring to Ruth's "expiatory passion" and "penitential fervor," mark her, too, as a victim of Puritan values.

20 The character of Ruth also highlights the importance of names to unlocking the themes of Cheever's story. Lawrence's name, of course, contains the word "law," but his nicknames also possess deeper meanings. Fitting the story's Puritan motif, for example, his sister Diana dubs him "Little Jesus" during the latter part of his youth. But it is his childhood nickname that has a particular resonance throughout the story.

> Tifty – a nickname he was given when he was a child, because when he came down the hall toward the dining room for breakfast, his slippers made a noise that sounded like "Tifty, tifty, tifty." That's what Father called him, and so did everyone else. (4)

21 The narrator carefully highlights the fact that this name was given to Lawrence by their father: symbolically, therefore, "Tifty" is a name associated with the paternal law. But it is the syntax of the narrator's description, this triple evocation of his brother's nickname that gives it added significance. Not only does the trio suggest the divine trinity of the Christian godhead, but it also makes use of a rhetorical strategy commonly used in the Bible. Revelation 4:8, for example, reads: "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty," or John 5:24, in which Christ proclaims: "Verily, verily, I say unto you" (AKJV). The Bible uses verbal repetition as a means of emphasizing the importance of a particular word: "verily" is repeated to highlight its importance, whereas the triple repetition of "holy" constitutes a form reserved for superlative statements. Cheever invokes this tradition at key points in the narrative. "The waves broke with a noise like a 'hurrah, hurrah, hurrah,' but to Lawrence they would say '*Vale, vale*'" (Cheever 18).

22 The sea forms the crucial backdrop to the narrative; the narrator recounts at the outset not only the death of his father by drowning, but also his belief in "the sea salt that I think is in our blood" (3). The sea therefore frames and informs the narrator's being. It bonds him with his family and to his history, and both he and his brother Chaddy miss the sea when they venture out West. The sea, in other words, gathers together the various discursive threads of the story, and every step of Lawrence's bad faith is connected back to a simultaneous rejection of the sea's power and the values it represents. Cheever writes: "I suppose it would have occurred to his baleful and incisive mind that the coast was terminal moraine, the edge of the prehistoric world, and it must have occurred to him that we walked along the edge of the known world

in spirit as much as in fact" (18). The sea thus comes to symbolize the nucleus of Lawrence's rejection: its transience, its prehistoric nature, its connection back to his father, the house, his family, the sea salt in his blood, even the "Tifty, tifty, tifty" that sounds not so much like slippers in a hallway as the white noise of waves breaking on the shore – the sea represents everything that Lawrence fears and despises, and yet which goes to the very heart of who he is.

23 The sea relieves the narrator from the nihilism that permeates Lawrence's thought. There is a paradoxical tranquility in the sea's restlessness that is typified by the family's daily swimming ritual, a practice that takes on quasi-religious overtones in its "illusion of purification" (10). The antidote to society's Puritan past is thus to be found in the sea. Reflecting on his encounter with Ruth in the laundry, the narrator thinks about the alternative spirituality he feels in the sea's presence. "Now I could hear the waves, whose heaviness sounded like a reverberation, like a tumult, and it pleased me as it had pleased me when I was young, and it seemed to have a purgative force, as if it had cleared my memory of, among other things, the penitential image of Ruth in the laundry" (17). The narrator also presents, in this moment of contemplation, a different mode for approaching the past. Lawrence's life is characterized by a string of goodbyes, but this pattern is not accompanied by a process of healing and moving on. On the contrary, his history is scarred by these failures, and these recurring moments of disillusionment are remembered with the force of resentment. For the narrator, by contrast, the sea allows him to forget, it allows him to be washed free of his pain and thus avoid the canker of resentment that eats away at Lawrence's being.

24 Using the sea's mythical symbolism, Cheever reaches back to a time before the invention of Christianity, before the God of the Puritans to a different and more ancient creation myth. Through a series of allusions, he instead evokes the pagan myths and deities of the ancient Greeks: Odette looks up at the night sky, trying to find the constellation of Cassiopeia; the narrator imagines Lawrence saying "*Thalassa, Thalassa*" (the Greek word for "sea") when he leaves Laud's Head; their sister, Diana, is an allusion to the virgin goddess of the hunt; the narrator's wife, Helen, is the namesake of the most famous beauty of the classical world. But these allusions are swallowed up in a greater story that is alluded to yet never explained, namely, the creation myth of the ancient Greeks.

25 The myth centers around the two original Greek gods, Uranus and Gaia, whose coupling results in the divine race of the Titans. Fearing the power of his children, Uranus banishes them to the bowels of the earth. Gaia, the earth goddess, is pained by his actions, and with the help of her children she kills Uranus. She chops off his penis and throws it into the sea, and from his blood Venus, the goddess of love, is born. This myth is crucial to understanding Cheever's story, particularly the ending. "The sea that morning was iridescent and dark. My wife and my sister were swimming – Diana and Helen – and I saw their uncovered heads, black and gold in the dark water. I saw them come out and I saw that they were naked, unshy, beautiful, and full of grace, and I watched the naked women walk out of the sea" (21). These closing lines are a symbolic reconstruction of the birth of Venus, but they are more than that. Cheever effectively juxtaposes the Christian God to the classical one: the abjection of murder, he suggests, is at the origin of the institution of the law, for the law is the legacy of the childrens' revolt against paternal tyranny.

26 The Christian God, as Nietzsche proclaimed, is either dead in Cheever's story, or at least missing, presumed drowned. From the sea there emerges a new law, a law that is based not on nostalgic resentment or the futile search for the father, but instead a law that has made the transition from paternal tyranny to feminine multiplicity (as symbolized by the contrasting "black and gold" of the women's hair). Cheever achieves this multiplicity at both the thematic and narrative level, tying together the story's series of layered repetitions. The climactic scene at the beach, in which the narrator clubs Lawrence over the head, has multiple resonances – it is a twist on the story of Cain and Abel, as many critics have pointed out, but it is also a

repetition of a childhood event. "I remembered that once, twenty-five years ago, when I had hit Lawrence on the head with a rock, he had picked himself up and gone directly to our father to complain" (4). The incident on the beach brings this reevaluation to a culmination, and Cheever masterfully juxtaposes the symbols of the origin (the root) to the father's absence (the sea). The narrator realizes, in that moment, that his anger is not directed against Lawrence personally. Instead, his horror stems from the poisonous ideas of which Lawrence is both a purveyor and an unconscious victim. The narrator comes to "understand the timeless desire for reconciliation," as Morace puts it, but in so doing Cheever offers the reader a curiously non-dialectical resolution (504). There is no reconciliation to be found in the story's external conclusion – the brothers are further apart than ever – but it is in this failure of dialectical resolution that the narrator finds internal peace. This serenity is inscribed in the narrator's very words: while the narrator moves on, the story remains as a testimonial farewell to the very act of saying goodbye.

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Résumé

La problématique de « Goodbye, My Brother », de John Cheever, s'articule autour du conflit entre le narrateur et son frère, Lawrence, dans le rapport que chacun des deux entretient avec le passé. La rancœur de Lawrence émane de l'instabilité d'un passé qui s'effrite. Composée d'une longue série d'au revoir, sa vie le détache de tout ce qui n'est pas à l'instar de ses critères d'excellence. En effet, la présence de Lawrence à la réunion de famille se révèle progressivement ancrée dans un but précis : revendre les parts de sa maison et leur dire au revoir à tout jamais. Le narrateur, quant à lui, entreprend une analyse de la psychologie de son frère, issue d'une autre perception du passé axée sur l'histoire. A travers cette structure, l'attitude de Lawrence est présentée comme produit du passé, en allant de l'évènement historique de la disparition en mer de son père à la généalogie puritaine de la famille Pommeroy. Tandis que Lawrence ne parvient pas à percevoir les répercussions des forces historiques qui s'exercent sur lui, Cheever renverse judicieusement l'analyse du narrateur sur elle-même. Au dénouement, le narrateur prend conscience que ce n'était pas tant la personne même de Lawrence qu'il abhorrait en lui que son manque de clairvoyance pour déchiffrer cette histoire à long terme ; aussi, se réconcilie-t-il avec le passé.